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# Introduction

## Subjectivity in European Song: Time, Place, and Identity

BENEDICT TAYLOR AND CERI OWEN

Song—the sound of the singing voice—has long proved the iconic medium of subjectivity, an audible signal of subjective presence. “As soon as vocal signs strike your ear,” proposed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, “they proclaim a being similar to yourself; they are, so to speak, the organs of the soul. Birds whistle, man alone sings, and one cannot hear either a song or an instrumental piece without immediately saying to oneself: another sensitive being is present.”<sup>1</sup> The idea was not new to the later eighteenth century of course: some form of this belief can be traced back to antiquity.<sup>2</sup> But this perceived associa-

tion between song and subjectivity nevertheless assumes particular importance for Rousseau (a composer as well as a writer and thinker) and his Romantic successors. Entering into alliance with modern conceptions of the self, the aesthetics of subjective interiority and the immediacy of musical expression, song—above all the nineteenth-century solo song, as epitomized by the German Lied—became emblematic of a particular historical understanding of subjectivity.

Song demands that we ask what it is to be an individual subject, a being with interior depths capable of self-expression through exteriorization in sound. It makes peculiarly intimate the purported depths of the modern subject in a way equaled by few other art forms. In its conjunction of the semantic (the referential meaning of the text) and the sonic (rhythm, assonance, and rhyme, the actual musical setting), song is constituted in the relationship between the signifying precision of a verbal language and the emotional impact of a musical one. As

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages, in which Melody and Musical Imitation Are Treated*, chap. 16, trans. John T. Scott in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), VII, 326.

<sup>2</sup>As the venerable example of Aristotle informs us, “voice is a kind of sound characteristic of what has soul in it; nothing without soul utters voice.” See *On the Soul*, II/8, 420b.

Rousseau recognized, it is the sonic immediacy of song's sounding (not just the referential significance of the words) that seems to bring us into the presence of another subject. Such is the potency of this effect that the musical sounds may themselves begin to assume the qualities of a virtual human subject or persona.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in existing as sound—an apparent presence without material body—this subjective being is always haunted by an absence, by the possibility that the subject so designated is really somewhere else, in space or in time. And—as numerous writers have asked—just whose subjectivity is potentially sounded in song, and more precisely how are such subjectivities articulated?

In recent years many scholars have moved beyond Edward T. Cone's influential formulation of the multiple "personae" projected by *Lieder*, interrogating the implications for song of the sounding or silencing of a multiplicity of cultural, social, and political voices, the erosion of authorial agency, and the figuring of a peculiarly intimate intersubjectivity between musico-poetic persona, performer, and listener.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The literature on this topic is extensive: see for instance Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), and "Poet's Love or Composer's Love?," in *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. Steven Paul Scher (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 177–92; Lawrence Kramer, "Song," *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), revised for publication in *Song Acts: Writings on Words and Music* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), and *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. 28–34; Fred Everett Maus, "Agency in Instrumental Music and Song," *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989): 31–43 (part of a wider journal issue, "Edward T. Cone's *The Composer's Voice*: Elaborations and Departures," dedicated to Cone's seminal 1974 text); Naomi Cumming, "The Subjectivities of 'Erbarne dich,'" *Music Analysis* 16/1 (1997): 5–44, and *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Berthold Hoeckner, "Poet's Love and Composer's Love," *Music Theory Online* 7/5 (2001) <<http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.5/mto.01.7.5.hoeckner.html>>; and Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Lawrence Kramer, "Beyond Words and Music: An Essay on Songfulness," in *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 51–67; Julian Johnson, *Mahler's Voices: Expression and Irony in the Songs and Symphonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Ox-

ford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Laura Tunbridge, "Singing Translations: The Politics of Listening Between the Wars," *Representations* 123/1 (2013): 53–86; *Brahms in the Home and the Concert Hall: Between Private and Public Performance*, ed. Katy Hamilton and Natasha Loges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Paul Berry, *Brahms among Friends: Listening, Performance and the Rhetoric of Allusion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and *Women and the Nineteenth-Century Lied*, ed. Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg (London: Routledge, 2016). Issues of performance are inherent in the rationale behind a series of new initiatives devoted to the study of song as performance, including the recent institution of The Oxford Song Network: Poetry and Performance (based at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), three of whose members offer contributions to this present special issue.

Such work is often predicated upon the recognition that song is not merely the transference of one artistic language into another—an interaction of words and music—but rather a mode of experience, a complex series of dynamic interactions between literature, music, and embodied performance. Taken from this standpoint, song's subjectivity emerges as always implicitly a form of intersubjectivity, assuming some sense of community, however nascent.

As a mode of intersubjectivity, song presupposes separation between subjects, whether in space or in time, yet a separation that song traverses and may attempt to overcome. Song carries the promise of subjective communication, an expressive burden that falls primarily to the voice. The distance or space between subjects is articulated by but can also be eradicated through the human voice. Such an understanding also locates song in a particular environment, and at a particular moment. In many of the articles collected here it is landscape that provides a medium through which singing subjects communicate their own subjective presence along with that of another, whether an implied listener or the landscape itself, external or internal, real or imagined—taken as a virtual subject. Equally, in other articles it is time, whether desired, remembered, lost, or relived, in which the presence or (just as often) the absence of the subject may be manifested.

The present collection draws together a variety of responses to these concerns. We seek to explore how song—traditionally conceived as an intimate form—can be understood as part of

ford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Laura Tunbridge, "Singing Translations: The Politics of Listening Between the Wars," *Representations* 123/1 (2013): 53–86; *Brahms in the Home and the Concert Hall: Between Private and Public Performance*, ed. Katy Hamilton and Natasha Loges (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Paul Berry, *Brahms among Friends: Listening, Performance and the Rhetoric of Allusion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and *Women and the Nineteenth-Century Lied*, ed. Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg (London: Routledge, 2016). Issues of performance are inherent in the rationale behind a series of new initiatives devoted to the study of song as performance, including the recent institution of The Oxford Song Network: Poetry and Performance (based at The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities), three of whose members offer contributions to this present special issue.

a broader series of discourses surrounding the negotiation of self in relation to the world. Each article assumes its own course within the general mandate of song and subjectivity, engaging as appropriate with issues of identity, voice, temporality, and place. Our six authors ponder the question of how song as a genre can articulate or project different kinds of subjectivities, how music and language interact to organize human experience, and how song might yield unique perspectives on the relation of the self to an exterior reality. Asking how song became caught up in various locales and at different times with culturally specific matters of identity and meaning, the articles circumscribe various local, national, and aesthetic traditions—North German, Austrian, French, Russian, British. In this, our aim is to prompt reflection upon the very nature of a European art song tradition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus contributing to a recent decentering of song historiography. The emphasis upon performance and attendant issues of time and space is not intended to limit the significant interaction of text and music, but rather to enhance this understanding, taking up different repertoires in order to grapple with song as a major cultural form.

Scott Burnham's opening article illuminates the ways in which different musical settings of the same Lied text may draw quite diverse implications from the original poem. Starting with an analysis of Goethe's *Wandlers Nachtlied*, "Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh"—a poem often described as the most perfect in the German language—Burnham considers settings of Goethe's celebrated verse by Carl Friedrich Zelter, Carl Loewe, Franz Schubert, and Franz Liszt. In placing emphasis upon the shifting sense of identity and subjectivity created through different musical articulations of time and space latent in Goethe's poem, Burnham draws out the ability of song to create and negotiate its own unique sense of time and space.

Benedict Taylor responds, conversely, to the apparent temporal and spatial disorientation and vacant sense of subjectivity in Schumann's *Liederkreis* setting poetry by Eichendorff. Highlighting the lack of narrative coherence, the continual search for subjective identity, and

the limited range of phantasmagorical Romantic images that recur again and again in Eichendorff's prose fiction, Taylor draws out their distinct affinities with the prevailing qualities of Schumann's cycle and suggests that this music engages with the theme of subjectivity most deeply by conscripting listeners into the task of subject-formation.

Philip Ross Bullock explores issues of landscape and space by taking Rimsky-Korsakov's song output as a means to illuminate their shift from pictorial realism to imbued landscape. In his account, the composer's songs stage a particularly intriguing interaction between lyric subjectivity and the exterior world, which evolves from his earliest songs (shaped by mid-century realist aesthetics) toward a post-Romantic, proto-symbolism around the turn of the century.

Taking further some of the themes raised by the second article, Julian Johnson attends to absence and the paradoxical embodiment of absence in Debussy's songs. His article explores the way in which these songs perform different versions of a broken and distanced subjective voice, from the ironic play with *commedia* figures and the exploration of erotic desire in the early songs, to a fascination with evanescence and absence in later ones. Johnson thus calls attention to a theme that pervades Debussy's output more broadly: its peculiar ability to make present a sense of absence itself.

Ceri Owen, in contrast, asks questions about the abundant sense of subjectivity or embodied "presence" articulated in many of Vaughan Williams's songs. Taking as a case study the *Songs of Travel* and locating the cycle at a turning point in the composer's aesthetics, she draws attention to its projection of multiple voices: agents engaged in embodied acts of singing and listening. Placing the work into dialogue with Vaughan Williams's contemporaneous cycle *The House of Life*, she demonstrates that the composer frequently imagined the building of musical community through song, a preoccupation shared by a contemporaneous musical culture for which composition was imagined as a form of lyrical performance, and singing and listening as creative acts of musical and subjective "making."

In the final article, Laura Tunbridge also ex-

amines questions of authorial multiplicity, tackling the often vexed question of the different identities projected by a song in piano and orchestral versions. Taking Richard Strauss's 1906 Heine setting "Frühlingsfeier" as a point of departure, she refigures the relationship between text and performance, written score and recording, subjective agency and technology, to raise questions about the subjectivity of the composer as accompanist, as manifest through

recordings. Having started the issue with a consideration of different musical responses to a single poem, we thus round off, aptly enough, by offering an elaboration upon a number of different versions of the same song. By way of conclusion, an afterword by Lawrence Kramer reflects upon the implications of the issues raised in the preceding six articles, with particular emphasis on what they have to say about song as a genre.

